



PIRATES OF SOMALIA

It's the biggest crime wave in modern times. But when you talk to the pirates and their victims, you realize it's not the story we've been told

BY SHASHANK BENGALI



During the first half of 2009 Somali pirates attacked more than 140 ships, netting millions of dollars. But at best, the ragtag crews are successful only a fraction of the time.

FARAH ISMAIL EID CAN'T REMEMBER EXACTLY WHEN HE FIRST SAW THE BIG SHIPS. HE WAS BARELY INTO HIS 20S THEN, Eeking OUT A FEW DOLLARS A WEEK AS A LOBSTERMAN IN A DESOLATE FISHING VILLAGE IN NORTHERN SOMALIA. One day, standing on the naked beach, staring at the Indian Ocean and the inky horizon beyond, he made out the distant shapes of vessels he had never seen in all the years he and the other men in his family had plied the seas for fish. *Invaders*, he thought—and he was right.

It was the early 1990s, the start of Somalia's two-decades-long-and-counting civil war, and the ships that had appeared out of nowhere were fishing trawlers from faraway countries: France, Spain, South Korea, Indonesia. They had trained crews, expansive nets and modern radar equipment, and they systematically began to run the locals out of business. "They fished everything—shark, lobsters, eggs," Eid recalled. "They collided with our boats. They came with giant nets and swept everything out of the sea."

With Somalia's police force and coast guard swallowed up in conflict, it was open season along Africa's longest coastline. International environmental groups estimate that unlicensed trawlers sucked hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of tuna, mackerel and other prized catches out of the Somali sea. Experts also believe foreign companies illegally dumped huge amounts of toxic waste in drums that later washed ashore when ripples of the 2004 Asian tsunami reached the eastern tip of Africa. About seven years earlier Eid had seen a large number of dead, seemingly poisoned lobsters appear on the beach in the town of Garacad, littering the sand like big seashells. "Ladies just walked onto the beach and picked them up," he told me in April. When he put one in a freezer, the shell turned to rubber.

Somalia's waters were a colossal crime scene, and to hear Eid tell it, no one was around to take action but the Somalis themselves. "Our community took a meeting, and we decided to fight against the foreigners," he said. This was his simple explanation for why hundreds of impoverished men like him launched one the greatest and most improbable crime waves of modern times: They became pirates.

By sheer force of desperation and daring, the pirates of Somalia have turned the treacherous waters of the Indian Ocean into their personal criminal playground. Starting as a vigilante coast guard and morphing into a ruthless mafia at sea, they have captured scores of ships, pocketed tens of millions of dollars in ransoms and defied a fleet of warships sent by some of the most powerful navies in the world. At any given moment they're holding at least a dozen vessels and more than 200 crewmen hostage in the tiny, nowhere ports of their homeland.

These pirates, however, are not who you think they are.

For every successful heist, every breathless report of a seized cargo ship or astronomical ransom, there are an untold number of failures. Engines sputter, skiffs capsize, men become discouraged or drown. When I saw Eid I began to understand why. Thirty-eight years old, soft-spoken and sunken-cheeked, he invested and plotted and tried for four years—but never actually captured a ship. Last year he was arrested, not on the high seas, mid-heist, hero-style, but in a crummy guesthouse on Somalia's barren north coast, where he was planning a hijacking. Inside the bleak desert prison where he and four co-conspirators are serving 15-year sentences, he walked with a distinctly unimpressive shuffle. He wore a fraying mesh T-shirt that was at least one size too big, and his bony arms seemed to swim in the sleeves. He looked almost like a teenager, not the father of two.

We met about two weeks after a group of pirates seized the captain of an American cargo ship, the *Maersk Alabama*, and held him hostage for five days in a lifeboat hundreds of miles off the Somali coast. The standoff ended when U.S. Navy snipers, perched on a destroyer floating 30 yards away, picked off three of the pirates simultaneously and hauled away the fourth to face trial in the United States. Eid, locked inside his bare brick cell, had heard few details of the year's most dramatic pirate failure, but he seemed indifferent. Falling short, even spectacularly, was part of the job. His view was typical of Somalis: *What else do you expect starving men in a dead-end country to do?*

"If 20 pirate groups go to sea, one will succeed," Eid said. "Nineteen may fail, but they'll keep trying. They have all the equipment and support they need."

PIRACY CAN THRIVE IN TODAY'S SOMALIA. THE ONLY LAW HERE IS THE LAW OF THE GUN.

A big part of the fascination with men like Eid is the word itself: *pirate*. It belongs to another era, before strong governments, advanced navies and international law enforcement. This is why piracy can thrive in today's Somalia. The only law here is the law of the gun.

Somalia is the big crooked elbow at the eastern edge of Africa that juts into the Indian Ocean. On a continent carved up haphazardly by colonial powers, the country is remarkably homogeneous: Its people are of the same ethnicity, speak the same language and observe the same religion, Sunni Islam. But their fatal fault line is clan. The roughly 10 million Somalis divide themselves into a Byzantine array of clans and subclans, differences that have made them both incapable of



Farah Ismail Eid (right) is a typical pirate. He failed miserably and was arrested. Pirates attack from skiffs (top left) with second-rate weapons (above left). Jurgen Kantner (top right) was a lucky victim: He lived. One of the sailors on another yacht (above right) was killed.

governing themselves and deeply suspicious of outsiders. The country hasn't had a functioning central government since 1991, when a coup toppled General Mohamed Siad Barre, an iron-fisted nationalist who ruled for two decades. Since then the country has been one vast conflict zone, fought over by an endless succession of warlords and militias who have reduced cities and towns to bullet-chewed shells.

In 1993 a U.S.-led international relief mission fell apart after militiamen shot down two Army Black Hawk helicopters over the seaside capital, Mogadishu. Eighteen servicemen were killed, and hordes of gun-toting young Somalis poured out in T-shirts and plastic flip-flops to drag the American bodies through the sandy streets. The incident, which journalist Mark Bowden meticulously captured in *Black Hawk Down*, was Bill Clinton's first major foreign-policy blunder as president, and it haunted his administration for years. The Pentagon remains chastened by the experience; it was the last time the U.S. military put boots on Somali soil.

Today Somalia has a government in name—the 15th attempt at one since 1991—but it controls only a few buildings in Mogadishu and is under constant fire from Islamist militias. The militias, some of which claim fidelity to Al Qaeda, are the real authority; even United Nations relief trucks pay them protection money. One in five Somalis has fled to another country, and any foreigner who steps foot in Mogadishu these days risks almost certain kidnapping—or worse. On my last visit, in late 2007, the UN relief mission I traveled with wouldn't enter the city limits. We had just a few hours on the ground and were escorted everywhere by our own mini-militia—a dozen-odd young Somalis with AK-47s, who rode ahead of us in the beds of Toyota trucks that bounced wildly along the cratered tarmac. We called our protectors the “blue shirts,” although many of them looked as though they could have been in high school.

Compared with the dystopian hell of Mogadishu in the south, northern Somalia remained quiet for years. After the coup the fishermen of Puntland, the semi-autonomous region that forms Somalia's northeastern tip, fished the waters as they always had, setting off with nets in tiny fiberglass boats and returning in the evenings to villages perched atop some of the most pristine beaches in Africa. For a while you might even have called the place pleasant. I was surefire kidnapping bait in Mogadishu, but merely two years earlier I had flown on a commercial jet directly into Bossasso, a ramshackle port in northern Puntland. For a week I rode around town without

a security detail, wandered through the markets and sat in restaurants to devour plates of grilled fish with lemon, all with minimal fear of ending up in the trunk of someone's car.

The calm on the surface, however, masked a culture of criminality that has reached full flower with piracy. Bossasso's simple concrete storefronts are notorious for gunrunning and counterfeiting, and the remote beaches on its outskirts have long been the base of one of the most dangerous human trafficking operations in the world. Last year more than a thousand Africans drowned trying to cross the Gulf of Aden to reach Yemen, aiming for better lives in the Middle East. The passage is horrific: Smugglers cram migrants by the score into fishing boats for a blood-boiling 30-hour journey, and when the waters get rough they routinely toss some passengers overboard into shark-infested seas.

Many of those same boats, Somalis say, are now being used for piracy, and Puntland, too, is all but off-limits to foreigners. I floated the idea of traveling there earlier this year to Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, the UN special envoy to Somalia, whose offices—like those of every diplomatic mission and relief agency that works on Somalia—are housed outside the country in Nairobi, the capital of neighboring Kenya. Unfailingly solicitous, the veteran diplomat turned cold when I brought up Puntland. “I'd advise you not to consider that,” he said. “I'd prefer you to stay alive.”

It was in Bossasso that Eid got his start as a pirate. For years he continued to trawl for lobsters for a small commercial fishing company, eventually saving up to buy three boats of his own. But catches rarely seemed to come. In 2005, living in a one-room shack with his wife and two children, he decided he could no longer stomach the sight of fishermen like him, men he knew, coming home with big ransoms. He traveled to Bossasso and traded in his fishing equipment and some savings for pirate gear: a couple of Kalashnikov rifles and rocket launchers. He rounded up five other fishermen, and they made a plan to set off in one of his boats to capture a ship. “In Puntland,” he said, “it doesn't take long to organize.”

Bruno Schiemy, former head of a United Nations panel that investigated illegal weapons flows in Somalia, believes men like Eid are merely the foot soldiers for vast, transnational crime networks run by Somali businessmen who live abroad, in places like Europe and the Persian Gulf, while overseeing shady dealings back home. “Those (continued on page 54)

Pirates

(continued from page 46)

are the real pirates,” Schiemy told me. That big money is splashing around Puntland is apparent in New Bossasso, a collection of custom villas on the city’s outskirts that looks like a shabby, dust-colored American suburb, a low-rent Orange County of the desert.

Thanks to these silent backers, the pirates are equipped with automatic rifles and fleets of motorized skiffs. Most have GPS-ready satellite phones with spare batteries and money-counting machines not unlike those at your local bank. The best-funded pirates use mother ships—usually other seized vessels—to direct attacks and resupply men after long, blazing-hot days at sea. There are pirate trainers, including many former Somali naval and marine officers, who lost their jobs after the government collapsed. In the largest groups, anywhere from 50 to 100 men—from the trainers down to the cooks—staff a single heist, and payment is merit-based: The more days you work, and the more dangerous your job, the bigger your share of the ransom.

“They have a good communications system, and no one can walk into a ship and order a captain around without knowing something about navigation,” said Twalib Khamis, a senior official at the Kenyan port of Mombasa. It was a warm day in April, and we were sitting in Khamis’s tidy air-conditioned office overlooking the port, the biggest in East Africa. In the first six months of 2009 pirates attacked more than 140 ships, more than the previous year’s total. Shipping costs in the Indian Ocean have soared, and Khamis said traffic at the port was beginning to suffer.

In 1990 Khamis was a young chief officer aboard the *Kota Ratna*, a Singaporean container ship. In those days Southeast Asia was the world’s major piracy hot spot—especially the Strait of Malacca, the narrow waterway that separates Malaysia from Indonesia, where pirates could rob ships and swiftly return to shore. The *Kota Ratna* was steaming through the strait toward Singapore harbor when Khamis, from inside his cabin, heard a scuffle on deck. Half a dozen men armed with knives and machetes had boarded the ship and tied up the captain. After a long, nerve-racking hour, the bandits made off with radios, walkie-talkies and big handfuls of the crew’s cash and belongings.

Thinking back on those knife-wielding thugs, Khamis, now 50, described the Somali pirates in awestruck terms. Days earlier, pirates had attacked a vessel off the Seychelles, an archipelago nation 1,000 miles east of the Somali shore. “How they get there, I don’t know,” he said, staring out his window at a silent harbor. “They’re becoming more daring every day.”

Daring, yes—but not always success-

ful. When Eid and his men set off one day in late 2005, they thought they were prepared. The plan was to identify a target, pull up alongside it and prop their metal ladder against the hull of the ship. One of the men would climb onto the deck while the others trained their weapons on any crew members, giving him cover. When the pirate had boarded, they’d toss him his weapon and clamber aboard after him. They even got their hands on some secondhand camouflage outfits just to look official.

But when they got about 100 miles out into the water, the problems began. Eid’s motor might have been serviceable for fishing, but it was too weak to catch up to ships cruising in the open sea at 20 to 30 knots. “We saw some, but we couldn’t get to them,” he said. They bobbed along for five fruitless days before heading back to shore.

Eid went back to Bossasso and found a stronger engine, a used German model imported via Dubai. The following year the group set off again, and this time they managed to pull up alongside an empty cargo ship. As they tried to hoist the nine-foot ladder, some of the crew locked eyes with them from the deck. They must have been a strange sight, this collection of skinny men in camouflage brandishing their rusting guns. In the dim evening light Eid could make out the crew’s faces clearly. “They were white people,” he said.

This time, however, the team couldn’t get the heavy ladder in position. The choppy waters tossed them around for what felt like several minutes until finally the ship steamed out of reach. Then the would-be pirates had bigger troubles. Eid’s vaunted new engine cut out suddenly, and they found themselves stranded in the middle of the ocean. They floated in the sea for two days and two nights. They were out of water, out of food and—because Eid couldn’t afford a satellite phone—completely out of touch. “I thought we might die of hunger,” Eid said.

The waters in which the pirates operate run over the equator, and the sun is merciless year-round. Many have perished at sea. But miraculously for Eid, the wind picked up on the third day of the journey. They were able to raise a sail and maneuver back to shore. When they reached dry land, Eid said a prayer of thanks. That was the end of the line for his luckless pirate gang. They disbanded, and Eid struck off on his own.

For all the investment, piracy remains a decidedly ad hoc operation—only as sophisticated as the poor, illiterate men who do the work. Not all the money is well spent. One morning earlier this year in Harardheere, a notorious pirate den, an unusual shipment arrived by road from

one of Puntland’s main towns. Ali Abdirur Samo, a former member of the pirate group, told me the boxes contained used scuba gear, a jumble of ratty-looking rubber tubes and scratched-up masks—but no oxygen tanks. A trainer showed the men how to fit the masks over their heads, but the tubes dangled uselessly at their sides.

“They didn’t work without tanks,” Samo said when we met in Nairobi earlier this year. “So no one used them.”

Samo is a slight man whose neatly trimmed goatee fringed a constant scowl. He said he was 26, but he looked much older; lines creased his brow and his close-cropped hair was flecked with gray. As we sat in a shopping mall cafe in Eastleigh, an immigrant enclave of teeming apartment blocks and raucous traffic circles, Samo explained how he was recruited into piracy last fall. He was working at the port of Bossasso, hauling sacks of grain and beans under a searing sun for a few dollars a day, when a fisherman he knew spotted him. “My friend said, ‘Why are you doing this hard work for such little money?’” Samo recalled. There was easier money to be had.

The fisherman brought Samo to one of Puntland’s largest pirate groups, which called itself the Central Regional Coast Guard. He looked like he could swim, so he was handed an old AK-47 and appointed to a team guarding hostages aboard the pirates’ biggest haul of the year: the *Sirius Star*, a Saudi Arabian oil tanker laden with 2 million barrels of crude, or roughly one quarter of all the oil the kingdom produces in one day. In January the ship was freed for a ransom that Kenyan maritime experts estimated at \$3 million. The U.S. Navy released a photograph that showed a large crate, apparently carrying the money, dropping toward the tanker by parachute.

From his post in a speedboat alongside the ship Samo watched the crate fall harmlessly into the ocean. “We didn’t know if there were explosives inside,” he said. Two of the group’s most experienced pirates went to retrieve it in case it was rigged. It wasn’t. That was an eye-popping payday; Samo walked off with \$80,000. A loader in Bossasso would have to work more than 60 years to earn that kind of cash. “I was amazed it happened,” he said. “I realized that this was real.”

In a few months as a pirate, Samo said, he pocketed about \$116,000. He returned to Bossasso to propose to the young woman who had borne his first child. Their wedding ceremony cost about \$5,000 and was everything his parents could have hoped for—goats slaughtered, a line of sand-spattered Toyotas in the procession, relatives trooping in from faraway villages. He bought two houses for his family and gave most of the cash that remained to his father. “If you have

(continued on page 108)

Pirates

(continued from page 54)

money, everyone likes you," he said. "No matter what your shape is, what you look like, women want you. It doesn't matter if you got that money by being a pirate."

It wasn't long, however, before Samo started to question the whole business. One day he learned that four members of his group had died on a mission, their empty skiff discovered floating hundreds of miles out at sea by another team of pirates. (That wasn't the only misfortune to befall the men behind the *Sirius Star* heist. Another five pirates reportedly drowned trying to make off with their share of the loot; one of them washed ashore with more than \$150,000 stuffed into a plastic bag in his pocket.) Samo resented that a few leaders were taking the lion's share of the ransoms, and he worried about the risk if he were ordered to go into the deep water. His mother called him constantly, begging him to come home. After about six months he decided to go AWOL, faking an illness and decamping to Kenya.

He'd been left with about \$15,000, not an insignificant sum for Somalia but hardly the kind of cash you can retire on. As he sipped from a cup of milky tea, he was renting a room in a shabby guesthouse in Eastleigh with three other ex-pirates. His new plan, as he explained it to me, was to apply for refugee status and try for a visa to the United States. I wanted to tell him that the list of Somali refugees wanting to get to America is nearly two decades long, not to mention that a man with his background might have trouble securing asylum. But he kept talking, and his flight of fancy grew more outlandish.

"As you know," he told me, "there's an African man who has become president of the United States. It's someone we feel like, well, he is one of us. He might consider helping us if he knew our problems."

He had crossed the line into the surreal, and I began to feel sorry for him. I shook his hand, ending the interview, and he seemed relieved when I paid for his tea. We walked down to the street, into the workday African multitude of men pulling rickety handcarts and brightly clothed women balancing sacks on their heads, and Samo turned and faded into the crowd.



The pirates aren't the only high-seas cowboys in this story; some of the sailors they come across are unrepentant gamblers themselves. Florent and Chloé Lemaçon, a young French couple, ignored multiple warnings from the French navy and sailed through Somali waters in April aboard their 41-foot yacht, the *Tanit*. They were dreamers, traversing the globe with their three-year-old son and two friends and chronicling their experiences on a blog. In one entry Chloé downplayed the pirate threat. "They're mainly after money," she said. "The danger exists, and it has no doubt increased in recent months, but the ocean is huge. The pirates cannot destroy our dream." On April 4 the *Tanit* was captured, and six days later the French military tried a risky commando mission to free the hostages. The boat was

released, but the pirates shot back, and in the crossfire 28-year-old Florent was killed.

Ten months earlier Jurgen Kantner, a 62-year-old German yachtsman, had been on a similar voyage with his longtime companion, Sabine Merz, sailing from France to Singapore. Kantner was another inveterate seaman; he'd lived on his aging yacht, the 53-foot *Rockall*, for more than half his life and had sailed four times across the Indian Ocean. He didn't own a home and frankly didn't care much for being on land; even when docked he preferred to sleep on his boat. Though he had the salty personality to show for a lifetime at sea, along with a sun-scorched complexion and a head of wild gray hair, he was not sanguine about the prospect of a pirate attack. When he set sail from the port of Aden, in Yemen, he chartered a course that hugged the Yemeni coastline, 150 miles north of Somalia. But the powerful summer winds pushed them south until finally they were snared by nine pirates off the Somali port of Lasqoray.

Immediately Kantner killed the engine. "Start it," one of the pirates ordered. "We're going to Somalia." When Kantner insisted the engine was busted, they tied a rope around his neck and the leader of the group pointed a pistol at him. But the engine required two keys to start, and unbeknownst to the pirates Kantner had removed one of them. The yacht was stuck. They drifted in the ocean for two days while the pirates waited for reinforcements.

"I just kept hoping for a military boat to appear," Kantner told me nearly a year after the hijacking. "No one came."

Two pirate skiffs eventually arrived, and they slowly towed the *Rockall* to shore. When they made landfall Kantner was stunned to see, in the midst of a dense tangle of brush and palm trees, a jungle lair that must have looked like the set for an extremely low-budget pirate movie. About 150 men were living in a clearing, sleeping on mats under the sky. Women and children traipsed through from time to time, perhaps from a nearby village. There were a couple of clapboard shacks but little else to suggest the place was fit for human habitation.

One pirate announced a ransom of \$2 million. Kantner then watched as the men proceeded to relieve the yacht of about 50,000 euros in cash—nearly his entire savings—as well as 40 gallons of whiskey and wine and about 200 bottles of beer. "Drunkards," Kantner sneered. These guys might have been raised Muslim, but now the party was on. They polished off the booze in a couple of days and then set upon Kantner, harassing him for the ransom.

"Give us the money or we'll fuck your wife," one said. "We know you have the money. Why won't your government pay?"

When foreign nationals are hijacked off the coast of Somalia, their governments typically negotiate with pirates, often with the Puntland regional government as an intermediary. Kantner spoke by satellite phone to German authorities, but they were noncommittal. Weeks passed, and the pirates grew impatient. Once, when a German official was on the phone discussing the ransom demand, a pirate squeezed off an AK-47 round that whizzed over Kant-

ner's head. The pirate grinned.

Another time Merz went missing for several hours. "Now we shoot the girl," one pirate told Kantner, and for good measure a gunshot rang out through the trees. After a few hours, however, Merz returned, apparently unharmed. The hostages were worth far more to the pirates if they were alive.

If these pirates were flush with ransom money, it wasn't evident to Kantner. They often went three or four days without food until a slaughtered goat would materialize, and they could have a couple of meals. There was no water, so they drank from a stream. Merz, a trim woman in her 40s, fell ill and shriveled to less than 100 pounds. Kantner's stomach, perhaps conditioned by decades at sea, held up better. He took a liking to camel's milk, a favorite of Somalis, and as he drank alongside them he got to know his captors better.

"Many of them didn't want to do what they were doing," Kantner said. Where the loot went seemed a mystery to the young pirates just as it was to him. "They were complaining that they get only a little money, maybe a few thousand dollars. The big money goes to the big boss, and he's not even in the camp." A neatly dressed young man, who was new to the group and identified himself as the cook, befriended Kantner and told him which of his comrades to fear and which were merely acting tough. By the end the young man asked Kantner if he could help him get to Germany.

On their 52nd day in the jungle a soldier from the Puntland government appeared with the ransom. Governments don't publicly release the details of ransom deals, but Kantner's pirate friend told him that the suitcase contained \$600,000 in cash, paid by the German government. They were released on the spot into the custody of Puntland authorities and flown to Kenya and then to Germany, where they were briefly a media sensation. But after more than three decades on his boat, Kantner had no place to call home. He was sleeping in a spare room in his mother's house, and he hated it. He wanted to retrieve his boat.

He hadn't seen the *Rockall* since the night they reached land in Somalia, but he understood from government officials that it had been towed several hundred miles to the west, to the quiet port of Berbera. When I traveled in April to the sweltering dock, where the air hung so heavy I barely wanted to breathe, I found Kantner crouched on a narrow wooden jetty, wearing a baseball cap and a pair of ratty shorts fastened loosely at his bare, bulging middle, trying to repair his lifeboat.

The yacht had been damaged when Somali authorities towed it to Berbera, he explained. The hull also needed to be patched up, and his engine had gone missing. The ordeal seemed to have taken a toll on Merz, who remained on the yacht and said little while Kantner focused on his repairs with the determined quietude of a man who has little else in his life. On most days he was the only foreigner in this remotest of African ports, a muttering figure who donned a shirt only when he ventured into the local market for a glass of sweet tea. Behind his back the Somalis in town called him "the crazy white man," but Kantner didn't care. When the repairs were

finished, he and Merz would try again to get to Southeast Asia—pirates be damned. “They already took all my money,” he said. “Now it’s just us and this old boat.”



But within weeks police were watching Eid. He hadn’t counted on the anomaly that is Somaliland, the northwestern region where things actually seem to work. Formerly known as British Somaliland, the colonial occupation here, unlike in the formerly Italian-controlled south, was relatively light-handed and left local institutions intact. When Mogadishu fell in 1991, Somaliland declared independence, and while no country has recognized its status, the territory has governed itself admirably well. It has an independent judiciary, an underequipped but feisty coast guard and a bitter rivalry with its neighbor to the east, Puntland, which Somaliland officials blame for allowing piracy to thrive.

“A lot of bad things are coming in from over there,” Admiral Osman Jibril Hagar, commander of Somaliland’s coast guard, told me. He unfolded a map that showed the territory’s 530-mile coastline, which his men were patrolling with just two aging speedboats (a third was being repaired) and a small fleet of motorized skiffs. Last September Eid and his four comrades were arrested at the guesthouse along with his boat, a few automatic weapons, a collapsible ladder and what officials describe as hijacking plans. Officials said they were tipped off by Eid’s neighbors. It goes to show what a little bit of government can do in a place like Somalia.

When I visited Somaliland in April, 26 men were in custody for piracy. Not all of them were willing to admit to being pirates, however. One morning at the jailhouse in Berbera, nine men who had recently been stopped while attempting to hijack a Yemeni ship sat sullenly in the prison yard, their skinny ankles chained together and tied to a metal stake. Through my translator I asked why they had become pirates, but they only glared at me through rheumy eyes. Several were wearing the patterned sarongs favored by Somali men, their colors badly faded. “We are fishermen,” one said. “No questions.” Another man nearly spat at me. “Go away,” he growled, “or maybe I’ll eat your mother.” We drove an hour south to the town of

Mandhera, little more than a dusty constellation of tin shacks and mud huts, with stick-legged children in raggedy clothes emerging from every crevice to gawk at me, the strange-looking visitor. The prison housing Eid and his comrades loomed suddenly over the scrubland. A fortress of stone and biscuit-colored brick, it was built by British forces to house Italian soldiers captured back when this was one of the remotest battlegrounds of World War II. The POWs are long gone, of course, as is the sign that welcomed visitors to BIG HELL. I simply banged on the metal gate to rouse the bored-looking guard in camouflage and electric-blue flip-flops, who let me inside.

Eid walked into the warden’s office and took his place on a rough wooden bench. His eyes were glassy, his hands fidgety. The warden, a copper-skinned man with a mat of silver hair, saw the classic signs of withdrawal from khat, a leafy green plant that when chewed produces a mild, amphetamine-like high. Many people say pirates take bundles of khat with them when scouting the sea for prey and that the high is what gives them their daring.

Eid squinted at the sunlight beaming through the window. “Now the international community is shouting about piracy,” he said in a flat, throaty voice. “But long before this we were shouting to the world about our problems. No one listened.”



It seems unlikely that Somalia’s fishermen will ever be compensated for what they lost starting in the 1990s. Global Witness, a London-based watchdog group, estimates that unlicensed fishing robbed Somalia of \$90 million in catches in just a two-year period, from 2003 to 2004—one of the worst examples of illegal fishing in recent history. As for the claims of toxic waste dumping, no thorough investigation has been done, although Bashir Hussein, a Somali environmental researcher, has photographs that show drums that look like the rusted shells of large rockets, some as tall as a person, lying on the empty beaches of Puntland. Until the country patches itself together politically, everyone in Somalia will continue to fend for himself.

“A country without a government is exposed to all kinds of illegal activity,” said Ould-Abdallah, the UN envoy. “All these

allegations are credible. Those drums that washed onto the coast, I don’t think they came from far away.” Still, he said, “all that these pirates are doing in response, it cannot be justified. No one buys the idea that these people are Robin Hood.”

Through our rambling, hour-long interview Eid voiced only one regret—abandoning his wife and two children, ages seven and 14. They were the reason he had turned to piracy, he said, and the idea of spending his middle-age years in prison, leaving them without their sole breadwinner, suddenly seemed to weigh on him.

Seated a few feet away, Yousuf Essa looked on gravely. The vice minister for justice in the Somaliland government, Essa had escorted me to the prison and then listened silently to Eid throughout the interview. When he finally spoke up, his take was remarkably sympathetic for an officer of the law. “When these people lost their livelihoods, they became pirates,” Essa said, leaning back in his chair and resting his hands on his round belly. “This has become the new way of life.” Then, with no prompting, this government official fished into his pants pocket, pulled out a faded \$10 bill and pressed it into Eid’s calloused palm. The prisoner bowed his head in silent thanks. Essa said later that Eid would no doubt spend the money on khat—but there was nothing else to buy in the prison anyway, no dreams of pirate treasure in that grim bastion.

Of the 590 prisoners in Mandhera that day Eid and his men might have been the most infamous, but they were hardly the most wretched looking. Nearly all the men, in fact, wore sullen expressions and clutched ratty sarongs to their skinny waists. Given slightly different circumstances, perhaps any of them could have been pirates. With their country collapsed, their livelihoods eviscerated and their bellies all but empty, it wasn’t hard to see why the able-bodied men of Somalia chase anything—cargo ships, cruise liners, yachts, oil tankers—for a decent payday. Even Eid, in retelling the long story of his failures, spoke with an unmistakable tinge of pride. At times he let loose a smile. He would do it all over again, he said, because he had nothing to lose.

